



THE WORK OF THE LIBERAL PARTY

DURING THE LAST

FIFTY YEARS.

A LETTER FROM THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

JOHN BRIGHT, M.P.

ROCHDALE,

January 17th, 1885.

DEAR MR. TOWNSEND,

You suggest that I should write something that may be of use to the new Voters under the Franchise Bill which has just become law. If I were speaking to your new Voters, and especially if to those who are Farm Labourers, I should say something like that I am about to write.

I should tell them that there is a great difference between the two Parties which will ask for their votes in the spring of 1886—a difference which they may see in all things during the last fifty years. The Reform Bill of 1832 was carried by the Liberal Party against the violent opposition of the Tories. It was the first step, in our time, towards a better representation of the People in Parliament. In the year 1867, now seventeen years since, the suffrage was first given to Working-men, when Household Suffrage was granted in our cities and towns. This was gained by the agitation promoted by the Liberal Party in the country, and was pressed upon the Tory Government during the discussions in the House of Commons in the Session of 1867.

The Liberal Party in the country and in Parliament has advocated Household Suffrage for the Counties for several years, during which the Tories have constantly opposed it. Last year the Bill giving Household Suffrage in the Counties became law, notwithstanding all the efforts of the Tories to obstruct it.

The Liberal Party gave to all Voters the protection of the Ballot, which the Tory Party strongly opposed. Every Voter is now able to vote as he wishes. No Landlord, or Farmer

or Employer of any kind can know how any vote is given—and now the poorest man is as safe in giving his vote as the richest. This is a great safeguard for the Voter.* The Bill for the re-arrangement of seats now before Parliament is the work of the Liberal Party. The Tory Party when in office did not propose it, and it is only under a Government of Liberals that so great and wise a measure could have been passed into law.

Political freedom therefore, and a real representation of the People, rich and poor, the country owes to the Liberal Party. But we owe much more to the Liberal Party.

We owe to it the repeal of the cruel Corn Law, and the removal of the hindrances to trade, caused by monstrous taxes on almost everything brought from foreign countries. The Corn Law, by shutting out foreign corn, was intended to keep the price of wheat at, or near, 80 shillings the quarter; its natural price without Corn Law is probably about 40 shillings the quarter.

Bread is, and will be, about half the price at which the Corn Law intended it to be in all years when English harvests were not good.

A great Minister, Sir Robert Peel, repealed the Corn Law. The agitation of the Anti-Corn Law League, the Irish famine in 1846, and the help and votes of the Liberals in Parliament, with the support of a portion of the Tories, gave him power to repeal this wicked and cruel law. Some of the Tories are now proposing to restore it, and again to make the Labourers' bread dearer, so that Farmers may be able to pay rents which they say are too high unless the law is put in force to raise the market price of wheat, and the baker's price of bread! The Tory Party and country gentlemen were very angry with Sir Robert Peel because he would not maintain the Corn Law. His Party deserted him, and drove him from office and from power because he preferred the interests of the nation, and the comforts of the labouring classes to dear bread, and high rents for the Landowners.

When the Corn Law was gone, other bad things went with it. The Liberal Government which came in after Sir Robert Peel destroyed the monopoly in sugar. Other great changes have been made, chiefly by Mr. Gladstone, supported always by the Liberals. The new Voters who are not young will remember the price of Bread in former days; they will know that Sugar is about one-third of the price it once was, and that they now can buy three pounds for the price they formerly paid for one pound; and they know that Tea costs less now than the tax alone which was imposed upon it before the Free-traders began the reform in our tariff and the

repeal of duties on imports from foreign countries. And during these years there has been a general and large rise in the wages of Working-men and Labourers in all parts of the country. Farm Labourers' wages have risen one-half or more, and in some counties they have nearly doubled since the days of Protection and the Corn Law.

But the Liberal Party has done more than give the mass of our people a real representation and a real power in Parliament. It has done more than give them freedom for their industry. It has given them the means to understand what Parliament is doing, and what it ought to do, for it has given them the vast advantage of a Free Press, and to their children the not less vast advantage of cheap and good Schools. Now almost every Labourer can have an admirable newspaper weekly for a penny, or every day one somewhat smaller in size, but not less admirable in quality, for a halfpenny. Newspapers, not so large and not so good as these, cost sevenpence when the Liberal Party began to deal with this question. The taxes on paper, and on the printed newspaper, strangled the Press, and the tax on advertisements was as great when a gardener sought a situation and employment as when a rich man advertised a mansion or an estate.

All this is gone,—these scandals and cruelties of the past are gone. The Liberals spoke and worked; the Tory Opposition step by step, was vanquished, and one after another these great evils vanished, and no longer disgrace English legislation.

And what of the cheap and good Schools? The child of the Labourer may gain an education that will give him as good a prospect, as regards labour and trade, as the child of a richer man has. He will grow up with a sense of self-respect; he will see before him a path along which he may find independence and comfort. The present gain of this is great; the future gain is beyond all we can estimate.

And what of the future? What will Household Suffrage in Counties and the new arrangement of Seats do for the new Voters, and especially for the Farm Labourers? If the new Voters know their interests, and if the Liberals are returned in great power to the new Parliament, two things will have a chance of being done. The Land Laws will be reformed, and much of them reformed out of existence. In past times and now our Land Laws have been framed to protect the great estates of great families. Great estates lead to great farms, and great farms lead to the result that it is almost impossible for Farm Labourers to become Farmers, and thus the path of the intelligent and hard-working Labourer to an improved position and condition for himself and his family is

barred and blocked. The holding of great estates under Entails and Settlements, and often heavily mortgaged and burdened, makes it impossible for them to be well cultivated, and thus the demand for labour is lessened, and a better rate of wages is prevented. This whole system of Land Laws must be broken down, and the new and great Reform will do little if it does not get rid, as far as possible, of the mischiefs of the past.

The Game Laws, too, will come under revision. Parliament may accept the principle that the creatures which live on and from the land, are the property, if there be any property in them, of the Farmer, at whose cost, and by whose labour, the farm is cultivated. When this principle is admitted in our law, then what is called "preservation of game" may cease; murderous conflicts on game preserves may be no longer known, and Labourers may not have before them an almost constant and irresistible temptation to become Poachers, and breakers of the law. If the new Voters will help the Liberal Party, the Liberal Landowners, the Liberal Farmers, the Liberal Shopkeepers and Tradesmen, in the towns and villages of the Counties and County Divisions, we may see much good done by a new Parliament.

If what I have written shall give information or useful counsel, I shall be glad. I have for more than forty years endeavoured to press forward in the country and in Parliament the changes to which I have referred. They have all, so far as they have been effected, in my view, been of great service to the country. The period of Reform is not yet ended; it will rest, in no small degree, on the good sense of the new Constituency, combined with what is intelligent and just in the old body of Electors, whether, as on two past occasions, in 1832 and in 1867, a large measure of Electoral Reform shall be followed by great measures of improvement in the legislation of our country. Perhaps I have written at too great length in reply to your letter—if so you will forgive me. The subject is too grave and too great to be treated in a paragraph.

I am, very truly yours,

JOHN BRIGHT

T. S. TOWNSEND, ESQ.

&c., &c.

